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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 3696  
INFO RUCNSAD/SADC COLLECTIVE  
RUEHMR/AMEMBASSY MASERU 4115

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [ASEC](#) [LT](#)

SUBJECT: LESOTHO: TAXI TROUBLE BLOCKS GOVERNMENT BUSES

11. SUMMARY: On the morning of May 20, private taxi drivers and owners attempted to block GOL-owned buses from operating in Maseru, the latest clash over government efforts to undercut the ability of taxi associations to paralyze public transport. The May 20 confrontation, at which police fired warning shots and tear gas, comes after taxi owners successfully shut down Maseru in 2007 in an effort to pressure the GOL in the midst of a political impasse over the distribution of parliamentary seats. The taxi operators' actions, based on their own narrow financial interests, are likely to hurt rather than help their cause. END SUMMARY.

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Taxi Trouble Blocks Buses  
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12. On the morning of May 20, private taxi drivers and owners attempted to block GOL buses at Ha Ts'osane, just north of central Maseru, in the latest clash over government efforts to break the grip of taxi owners on public transportation in the capital. Lesotho Mounted Police Service (LMPS) officers arrived on the scene, discharged firearms, and used tear gas to disperse the group of private taxi owners who were obstructing the buses. No injuries were reported. Claiming that the GOL buses do not have proper permits and that the taxi owners have not been consulted about the new GOL routes, the private transportation owners reiterated their intention to stop the GOL buses from operating.

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A Checkered Political Background  
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13. In March and December 2007, Lesotho's political opposition, led by the All Basotho Convention (ABC), called two general strikes designed to put pressure on the GOL in the context of a political impasse over the distribution of parliamentary seats. These strikes, or "stay-aways," were observed and enforced by Maseru's taxi associations - groups known for their strong opposition ties. As the majority of Maseru's work force uses private taxis for their daily commute, taxi owners proved their ability in March to shut down the city. The December action fizzled, however, due to diminished public enthusiasm for political action during the end-of-year holiday season.

14. On January 30, taxi owners publicly protested government plans to purchase buses, primarily to transport civil servants, claiming that the move would harm their livelihoods. On April 30, Minister of Public Works and Transport Ts'ele Chakela and Principal Secretary Lebohlang Phooko received a fleet of twenty new buses at the Maseru bridge border post. Heavily armed LMPS Special Operations officers were present at the bus' arrival, while chanting Lesotho Congress for Democracy (LCD, the governing party) supporters gave the event political overtones.

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Speeding Down the Wrong Lane  
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15. COMMENT: The taxi drivers' actions at Ha Ts'osane are likely to detract from their public support, and by extension, that of Lesotho's political opposition. While the public may find fault with some of the GOL's political maneuvers, the use of government buses to transport civil servants, who comprise the largest body of employees in the country, and other workers is likely to be quite popular. The taxi operators' actions, based on their own narrow financial interests and past political miscalculations, could hurt rather than help their cause. END COMMENT.

MURPHY